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FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR.

BEFORE the vernacular of the people displaced the *classic* Latin as the principal language of instruction in our schools, one heard or saw nothing of the diversity of opinion or opposition in theories regarding the nature of the concept of grammar and the method of its teaching. There was but one concept and but one generally recognized method of correct grammar instruction. This absence of contention was owing to the fact that the grammar teaching of the time was successful. And this success was due to the conformity of the method of teaching with the concept of the nature of the subject held by school-teachers at the time.

When, however, the vernacular became the dominant language of the schools, a language radically different from the highly artificial and the mechanically constructed Latin, as to its basis, unit, and method, grammar appeared to become a very difficult subject, the teaching of which was attended with great meagerness of results, a paucity which is responsible for the present worry and confusion existing in the minds of grammar teachers. The present failure of grammar teaching is due, not to the greater intrinsic difficulty of the English language, for such difficulty does not exist, but to the adherence of teachers to their concept of the nature and method of Latin grammar in the teaching of a language whose nature and method of development depend upon radically different principles.

There is, no doubt, a generally prevailing consciousness among the teachers of the country of the inadequacy of their efforts and methods concerned in the teaching of grammar, but ideas as to the source and cause of the difficulty are, among the rank and file of teachers at least, still very vague and indefinite. The ancient concept of grammar, which may be designated the Latin concept, still dominates the majority of teachers in their work of grammar teaching. Such a belief is strengthened by the examination of the text-books of grammar most extensively in

use throughout the country as the regularly adopted books. A perusal of these books shows that their makers have a knowledge of the true nature of English, as their phrasing of fundamental principles indicates; but that this knowledge is not clear or definite is also shown by their treatment of the mass of detail forming the body of the books, which proves that the dominant concept which determines and molds the spirit of the books is still the mediaeval Latin concept of grammar.

The basis of this conception of English grammar is the same as that for the Latin language, viz., a system of inflections and associated rules of syntactical agreement. A highly developed system of this kind is necessary when the word, as the unit of the language, is made to perform alone the complex function of expressing, not only a thought-general modified by thought-particulars, such as gender, number, tense, and case, but at times an entire judgment. When the single word is given so important a function, it is easy to see how the attention of students would be naturally withdrawn from the thought expressed to the complex and artificial structure of the expression, and not only how a knowledge of grammar was under such circumstances indispensable to "correct speaking," but how the teaching of the grammar of such a language could develop correct speaking and have such an end as one of its legitimate purposes.

An examination of the structure of present-day English, as found in the usages of the people and in the literature of the language, reveals the existence of the practice to give expression of each particular thought-element by a separate word, which removes the necessity for inflections and their associated system of agreements, and accounts for the disappearance of most of the inflections which in the former periods of the history of the language, were to a high degree the basis of its structure.¹ For of all the endings to show case, the genitive remains alone for all nouns; for pronouns, the nominative and accusative singular of the first and third personal pronouns alone remain; all inflections for gender have disappeared; number is denoted by the

¹ E. A. ALLEN, "English Grammar Viewed from All Sides," *Education*, Vol. VII, p. 460.

single ending *es*, frequently changed to *s*; inflections of verbs have been restricted to the various forms of *to be*, and for other verbs to the third person *s* in the present tense, *d* or *t* in the past tense and past participle of regular verbs, and a rare occurrence of *en* in some irregular verbs; the subjunctive has lost all inflections; the adjective has lost all of its original sixteen forms for the positive; the comparative *er* and superlative *est* remain alone of all the adjective inflections; the articles have lost all their endings. There remain, in addition, the inflections of a few "survivals" and of those words borrowed directly from a foreign language.

Although the inflections have largely disappeared in real English, the grammars still make much of them as an important part of English grammar. They dwell with still greater emphasis upon the rules of syntax associated with the completest use of the inflection system, although these rules have no longer any application to the practical use of English. The modern grammar is padded with an abundance of such rules; *e. g.*, the subject of a verb is in the nominative case; and a verb agrees with its subject in person and number. Along with the elaboration of an inflection system and an antiquated body of syntax goes the deductive method of teaching — a method whose use is made necessary by the absence of the facts and data of which they treat in actual life, where they can be made the objects of concrete observation and inductive generalization. So I consider as entirely just Mr. Lang's² characterization of the "Latin" concept as one having the wrong basis, the wrong unit, and the wrong method. It is a concept without a universally organizing principle, since it does not apply to the facts of English. It is static instead of dynamic, since it has no correspondence with the nature of a living, progressing speech, whose tendency is to become continually more closely adapted, as an instrument, to the freest performance of its functions.

In forsaking the formal concept of grammar as one untrue to the nature of English, we are compelled to look for some

² S. E. LANG, "Modern Teaching of Grammar," *Educational Review*, Vol. XX, p. 294.

organizing principle which will furnish the basis of unity and co-ordination, among the facts of English as we find them in the usages of the people today.

A study of these usages reveals the fact that the influence underlying the development of language as the instrument of thought is the same as that underlying the evolution of the human spirit as a whole, viz., a desire for the freedom found in the state of self-realization and control — a control in this instance expressed in the tendency to throw off all elements and modes of expression which do not express the thought in as simple a form as that in which the thought-action itself occurs. This is the import of the “descriptive,” “logical,” “dynamic,” or “organic” concept of grammar. It is essentially the concept of “freedom” in language expression. Through the influence of this concept the language structure is in a process of continual adjustment, through the selection of well-adapted elements and the discarding of ill-adapted elements, to the end that the thought will receive fullest and freest expression, with least violence done to its meaning by the medium of expression; a concept that is “descriptive” in that it is a characterization of the thought-process; “organic,” in that its function is inseparably associated with the thought-function. So grammar becomes that particular language study which treats of the uses and relations of words in their function of expressing thought. It is therefore a study that has flexibility and movement. It is dynamic and not static.

Its basis is word-position, corresponding to the sequence of thought-particulars in the complex act of judging, instead of a system of inflections. Its unit is the sentence instead of the word, since the unit of thinking is the thought, the sentence not viewed as a collocation of words, having in themselves a complete and separate existence, but rather viewed as “thought passing over from one mind to another, becoming visible and tangible almost as language.” In this light the sentence in its parts and word-relations will reveal the phases and connections of the thought-processes, and these phases and connections will be shown in their particularity and their natural succession by particular words and corresponding word-orders in the place of a system

of analogous inflections and agreements. Even when viewed in the true light, there is probability that the sentence and the corresponding thought will be imaged as mechanically associated segments, if the study is approached in the first stages from the external rather than from the internal or thought side. It is certainly true that sequences of functions or tensions, as found in the thought-process, cannot have a spatial representation without the introduction of artificiality. The important thing in the beginning of grammar teaching is that the spatial images be not made prominent, but that the internal side, the thought-process, be so emphasized that the artificiality of its spatial representation be lost, or at least not be taken account of. Thus we are driven to use an inductive method in grammar teaching—a method, in this instance, which must begin its observations with introspection of the thought-process, advancing outward in its development to the externalized process, the sentence. I think that the “segmented” notions of thought and sentence structure would never arise in the minds of children if the formal concept teachers were “called off,” so to speak, and the children were left as regards their development of a language-concept in the state of nature. Naturally there is no strain in children between their thought and its expression; and if they were left alone in this regard, they would evolve a true, though simple, system of grammar from their own consciousness and feeling of their thought-forms and relations. If they are able to do this without special instruction, how much more complete, extended, and amplified will this naturally evolved concept become when it is guided in its development by a teacher who is aware of the fundamental principles of its growth, and who conforms her methods to these principles!

A. A. FARLEY.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
Graduate Schools.